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ABSTRACT

A study sought to determine what four major populations think about six specific issues relating to vocational education programs. A secondary objective was to determine attitudes about some issues specific to each of the groups surveyed. The four population groups were eleventh grade male and female, vocational and academic students; parents; educators; and representatives of business and industry. All respondents were asked six common questions and other questions specific to the group. Respondents were almost unanimous regarding the importance of schools providing vocational education. Most of the respondents in all four groups indicated that vocational education was either very or somewhat important in attracting new industries. Responses indicated that more money should be spent on vocational education programs. The largest percentage of each group indicated that vocational education prepared young people fairly well for jobs. The adult populations were far more critical than students. Students were also asked about future plans and program choices. Parents were questioned regarding their children's plans and programs. Teachers were asked why students take vocational education courses. Employers and workers gave vocational education graduates high marks in job performance. (YLB)

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A STUDY OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF SELECTED POPULATION GROUPS TOWARD VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOLS OF NEVADA

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Purpose of the Study

In the belief that vocational education is useful for students, the business and industry community, and to the future economic well-being of Nevada, it seemed important to find out what people think about current vocational programs. The way in which vocational education is viewed by persons directly associated with it can be of assistance to state-level policymakers in regard to the future development and improvement of preparation of high school students for entry into a changing work force as well as for continuing education. Those individuals who are directly associated with vocational education were defined as students, parents, educators and representatives of business and industry. The purpose of this study was to determine how these various groups of people feel about vocational education in Nevada secondary schools.

Methodology

The primary concern of this study was to determine what people think about six specific issues relating to vocational education programs in secondary schools in Nevada. A secondary objective was to determine attitudes about some issues specific to each of the groups surveyed. A questionnaire was designed with two parts. The first part contained questions specific to the particular group being surveyed and the second part contained six common questions.

The study included four major population groups: students, parents, educators and representatives of the business and industry community. Students sampled were 11th graders with equal distribution between males and females and vocational and academic students. Parents sampled were those of 11th grade students, half with children

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enrolled in vocational programs and half with children in academic programs. Educators consisted of administrators, counselors, and both academic and vocational teachers. Employers and employees were included as respresentatives of the business and industry community.

Distribution of the survey questionnaire to the four groups was determined by proportional representation in the State. Nevada is somewhat unique as to the distribution of the population. There are two major population centers: Clark County with 58% of the State's population and Washoe County with 24% of the State's population. These two areas are 450 miles apart. The balance of the State reflects the rural nature of Nevada and is represented by 15 counties, covering approximately 85,000 square miles. It was important that the study consider this population distribution and reflect attitudes from each geographical area. A total of 3,884 questionnaires were distributed by various means throughout the State.

Findings

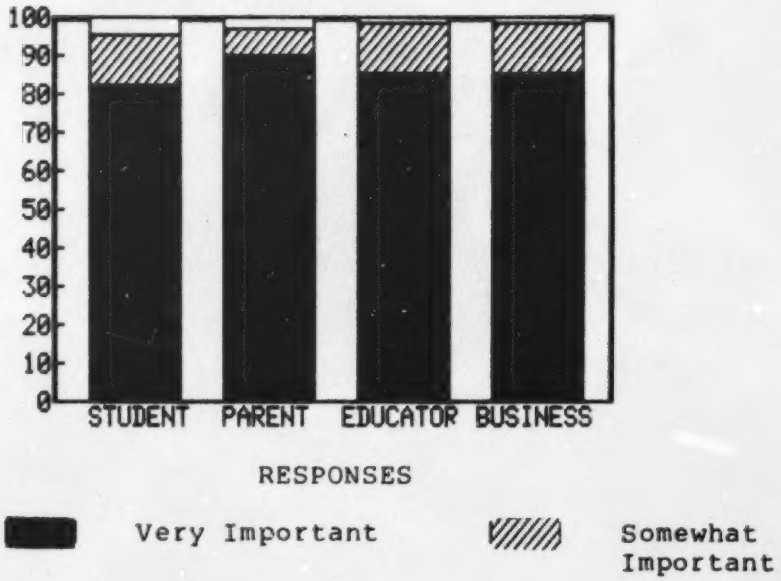
The six common questions asked of all respondents dealt with determining how people felt about the importance of schools providing vocational education, whether the emphasis being placed on programs is adequate, the degree to which expenditures should be made in support of secondary vocational programs, the importance of vocational education in attracting new industries, and how well young people are being prepared for jobs. Another question asked for a comparison of Nevada's vocational education programs with those of other states if respondents were familiar with programs in other states. The following discussion addresses the responses to these six issues by the various population groups sampled.

The Importance of Obtaining Job Skills

In response to the question about the importance of providing opportunities for students to obtain job skills before graduation, there was almost total unanimity among persons responding. Ninety-six percent of the students, 97% of parents, 96% of educators and 99% of the respondents in the business community felt it is important for schools to provide programs for students to acquire specific job skills. There were no major differences between the attitudes of students in rural and urban areas, between males and females, or between academic and vocational students. Parents of vocational students overwhelmingly responded (98%) that, in their opinion, it is very important for schools to provide these opportunities to students. Eighty-four percent of the parents of academic students felt it is very important. Most educators (86%) indicated that it is very important while the 13% of the remaining educators indicated it was somewhat important. While 80% of the administrators and 86% of the counselors indicated it is very important for schools to provide vocational programs, 86% of the teachers (94% of the vocational teachers and 77% of the academic teachers) gave that same response. Since employers and workers in business and industry have an opportunity to observe directly the products of vocational education, their responses to this issue provided a viewpoint based on a

knowledge of labor market needs. Their responses were positive: almost every response was either "very important" or "somewhat important" with a total of 99% indicating one of these two opinions. The following chart illustrates the responses to this question.

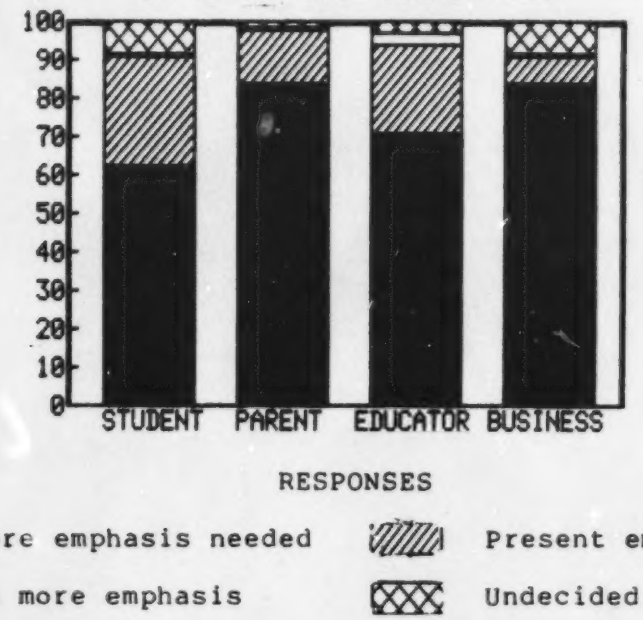
THE IMPORTANCE OF PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES
FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION



Should More or Less Emphasis be Given to Career Preparation through Vocational Education Programs?

In general, respondents supported increased levels of emphasis of vocational education. Students enrolled in vocational education programs felt that more emphasis is needed (66%), while 59% of the academic students indicated there should be more emphasis. Most of the other student respondees indicated that the present levels of empasis were sufficient. Parents and business and industry respondents had similar opinions: 84% of each group indicated there should be more emphasis. Seventy-one percent of the educators felt more emphasis is necessary. While 80% of the administrators indicated that vocational education is very important, 56% responded that these programs should receive more emphasis. Counselors responding (84%) felt that more emphasis is needed. While 89% of the vocational teachers responded that there should be more emphasis, 55% of the academic teachers gave that same response. Most of the remaining responses were that the present emphasis was enough, although a few in each group were undecided. The following illustrates these responses.

Should More or Less Emphasis be Placed
On Vocational Education?

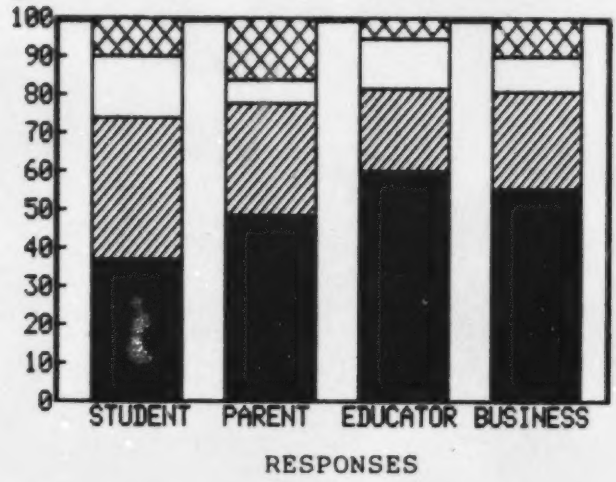


How Important is Vocational Education in Attracting New Industries?

With the increasing emphasis on economic development and diversification in the state of Nevada, it was important to deal with this topic. When asked if vocational education is helpful in attracting new industries, more educators and business and industry representatives recognized that potential, although most of the respondents in all four groups indicated it was either very or somewhat important. Most students (over 75%) indicated that vocational education has a role to play in attracting new industries, but 10% were undecided about this question and 15% felt it is not important. There were no significant differences between academic and vocational students. A slightly higher percentage of urban students felt that vocational education is very important. To some exent the question, when asked of students, deals with an issue outside the realm of their high school program and could be a reflection of their concern, interest or awareness of the community and economic development. More than three-fourths of the parents were of the opinion that vocational education is important to attracting new industries, with no sizable differences of opinion between parents of academic and vocational students. Eighty-two percent of the educators responded that vocational education was either very important or somewhat important in attracting new industry. Responses in this group were fairly consistent geographically, although a slightly higher percentage of rural educators indicated it was "more important." Responses from business and industry expressed positive beliefs about vocational education's role in attracting new industry. Fifty-six percent consider it very important, while another 25%

consider it somewhat important. The chart below displays these responses.

How Important is Vocational Education
In Attracting New Industry?



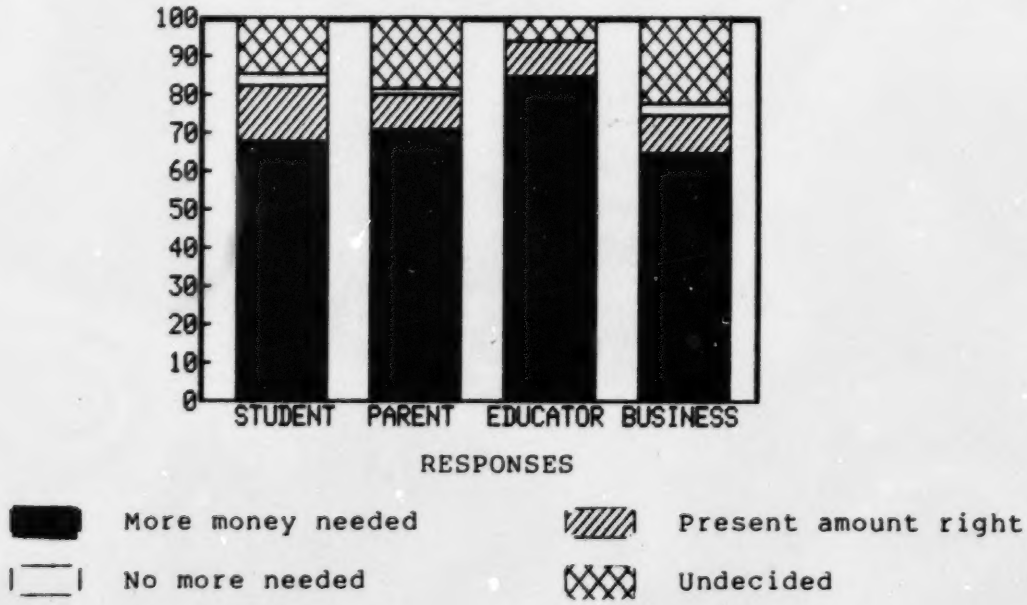
To What Extent should Vocational Education Programs be Supported by State and Local Taxes?

While responses of each group indicated continued or increased support of vocational programs, the issue of funds to support programs was the topic of another of the general questions. Few people in each group appeared to be content with the current levels of expenditure and only a very small percentage of each group thought that less money should be spent on vocational education. In all groups, the majority believed that there should be some increase or that much more money is needed for vocational education. In response to the issue of funding, 68% of the students, 71% of parents, 85% of educators and 65% of employers and workers held the opinion that more money is needed. It was expected that students answering this question might not be knowledgeable about the actual process of how schools are financed but that their answers might show whether or not they were at all concerned with how much is or should be spent on vocational education. The assumption appears to be supported since responses varied over the range of options provided. Overall, the pattern of responses did not vary by more than a few percentage points in terms of region or between males and females or academic versus vocational students. Sixty-eight percent felt more money should be spent. Not surprisingly, educators who could be considered involved in school programs more directly felt more strongly that increased money is needed to support vocational education, although the opinions were about equally divided between much more money and some increase.

This question provided parents the opportunity to express their opinions regarding the need for vocational education in Nevada. A total of 71% of all parents indicated that more money is needed for vocational education. In comparing the responses of parents of academic students to parents of vocational students, the responses appeared to indicate far more familiarity and concern for vocational education expenditures on the part of parents whose children are taking vocational education courses. However, parents of both academic and vocational students felt that there is a need for an increase in the amount of money provided for vocational education. A total of 65% of the business and industry responses indicated that more money should be spent on vocational education. The viewpoints of parents and persons in business and industry could be a reflection of the current economic condition of the state and the extent to which taxes should be increased to pay for public functions such as education. This is particularly true in light of the responses given earlier to the questions regarding the importance of vocational education and the amount of emphasis it should be given in the schools.

Overall, the opinions about financial support for vocational education reflected the viewpoint that there should be more money spent on these programs. Few of the respondents in any group felt that less money should be spent on vocational education. While the opinions could be interpreted as mostly positive in regard to increasing the financial support for vocational education, there does not appear to be as much enthusiasm for large increases, even though the overwhelming majority of people in all four groups consider vocational education important and believe that more emphasis should be placed on these school programs. The following chart illustrates these responses.

Should More or Less Money be Spent On Vocational Education?



How Well do the Vocational Programs Offered by High Schools Prepare Young People for Jobs?

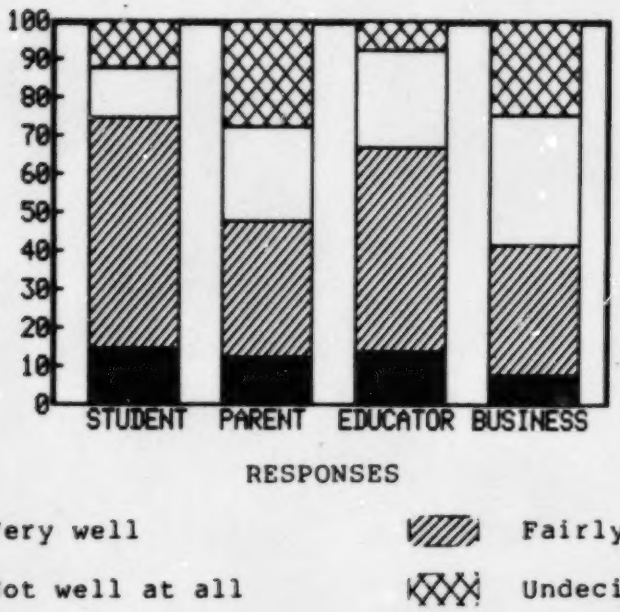
The responses of each population group in assessing the effectiveness of vocational education in preparing young people for jobs varied considerably in relationship to viewpoints about vocational education's importance or the amount of emphasis that should be placed on it. A smaller proportion of each group indicated that the job preparation function was carried out very well. The largest percentage of each group indicated this objective of vocational education was fairly well achieved. The adult population groups were far more critical than students.

Three-quarters of the students rated job preparation very well or fairly well accomplished. Rural students tended to rate the job preparation role higher than urban students. While most parent responses were positive, only 13% of all parents indicated that the programs prepare students very well. The educator group felt that the programs needed some improvement and only 14% felt that the schools met this responsibility "very well". In business and industry, less than half of the respondents gave similar viewpoints. The combined responses of employers and workers reflected a qualified positive opinion about the result of vocational education in terms of preparing students for jobs. Thirty-four percent said the programs prepare students for jobs fairly well. Eight percent felt programs prepared the students "very well".

On the other side, only 13% of students said job preparation was not achieved too well or not at all. Parents appeared to be most critical of this objective of vocational education, with one-quarter of them indicating "not too well" or "not well at all". In this case, fully 16% said preparation of students is being achieved "not well at all." While a similar one-quarter of educators held these same opinions about job preparation, the percentages were reversed with 17% saying the objective was not too well accomplished. A large percentage of the business and industry representatives were undecided (24%), but 27% of this group felt this task was not being accomplished.

Overall, the opinions about the job preparation objective of vocational education was seen as being accomplished fairly well, although a substantial proportion of each adult group did not believe that this objective is being accomplished as well as it should. The following chart illustrates the responses to this issue.

How Well Does Vocational Education Prepare Students for Jobs?



How Do Vocational Programs in Nevada Compare with those in Other States?

It was not expected that so small a percentage of persons would have some familiarity with vocational education as the responses indicated. In addition, the viewpoints expressed about a comparison of Nevada programs to those in other states was not expected either. The number of responses to this issue were much too small to be anywhere near completely valid. However, those that did respond to the question indicated that Nevada's programs were not as good as programs found in other states. It should be pointed out that these responses probably reflect opinions about individual programs, not an overall state program. About half the students who were familiar with vocational education in another state said that the Nevada program was not as good or poorer. Among parents, 70% categorized vocational education in this state as not as good or poorer. Educators agreed with that and the percentage of responses was similar. As for employers and workers, 60% gave one of these two opinions.

The second part of the survey asked different questions of each group. The results of this portion of the report are summarized below.

Students

The first question asked of all students was what they planned to do after graduation. Nearly half of all the students (more males than females) indicated that they planned to go to a four-year college. Community college attendance was the response of a smaller percentage of all students, with more females selecting this choice.

A larger percentage of vocational students than academic students indicated they would go to work directly after graduation. Overall, most eleventh grade students (almost two-thirds) responding to this question indicated that they plan to continue in further education after graduation.

The second question dealt with why vocational and academic students chose their particular programs. Students were asked why they had or had not taken vocational education courses. Seventy-one percent of the responses from vocational students indicated either job preparation or preparation for college as a reason for taking vocational programs. A small percentage indicated "other" as a reason, and in an analysis of the reason most said they were taking the courses for their own enjoyment. Since almost half the academic students said in response to the earlier question that they intended to go to college, it was expected that a similar number would give college preparation as the reason for not taking vocational education courses. However, only 29% gave the specific reason of preparing for college for not taking vocational courses.

To some extent, "there was no time in the schedule" was not unexpected as a reason for not taking vocational courses, but the large percentage was. In this case, 29% of academic students indicated that lack of time in their schedules was the reason for not taking vocational education. When asked who had helped in course selection, almost half the vocational students indicated they had selected their course on their own. Very few had help from counselors or teachers. In addition, almost all vocational students are satisfied with their programs. Most vocational students do not care what other students think about them because they selected vocational courses. In fact a large number think other students envy them because they are learning job skills.

Parents

Parents were asked about their child's plans, and why their child was or was not enrolled in a vocational program. Over half of the parents surveyed stated that their child would be continuing his/her education at some kind of post-secondary institution. Differences between the parents of vocational and academic students were not significant although a slightly larger percentage of the parents of academic students felt their child would be going on to a four-year college. The responses of parents of both groups of students were generally close in regard to the percentage who felt their child would be going to work. Why students do or do not take vocational courses is of concern. One-third of the parents of vocational students felt job preparation is the motive for enrolling in a vocational program; about one-fourth felt that their child was satisfying elective requirements, and a slightly smaller percentage indicated that the motivation was preparation for further education. These responses indicated that the reasons for taking vocational courses do not necessarily correspond to the future plans indicated by vocational students, over half of whom said they plan to go on to further education. Responses to the same question by parents of

academic students indicated that further education was the most common reason that academic students did not take vocational courses, but that lack of information also prevented students from considering vocational programs.

The responses to who helps students make decisions about enrolling in vocational courses reflected the attitude that parents of both groups of students saw themselves as having influence in the decision, although a larger portion of the parents of vocational students felt they helped in that decision than did parents of academic students.

Both groups of parents were satisfied with the program in which their child was enrolled. Over 80% of each group indicated that they were very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the respective program. Academic students' parents were slightly more dissatisfied with academic programs and would reconsider vocational programs as an option if their child were starting high school again.

Educators

When asked their opinion as to why students take vocational education courses, educators generally agreed on two reasons. Eighty-nine percent of the educators felt that it was either because they are not interested in going to college, or that they know what they want to do after graduation.

While 47% of the administrators indicated that students take vocational education courses because they are not interested in going to college, 44% said it is because vocational students know what they want to do after graduation. None of the administrators felt that students were taking easy courses, although 9% felt it was a method of avoiding academic courses. Another difference regionally was that a greater number of administrators in urban areas felt that students are enrolled in these programs because they are not interested in going to college.

More than half of the responding counselors felt that students take vocational courses because they are not interested in going to college. Thirty-three percent of the counselors felt students pursue these programs because they know what they want to do after graduation.

Teachers were in agreement with administrators and counselors. Fifty-six percent of them felt students take vocational courses because they are not interested in going to college and one-third of them felt it is because those students know what they want to do after graduation. There was little difference in opinions between academic and vocational teachers. Academic teachers felt students who take vocational courses are not interested in college and more than half of the vocational teachers hold that same opinion. The vocational teachers are more convinced that vocational students know what they want to do after graduation than are academic teachers.

The responses indicated that educators in general believe that students take vocational education courses for two reasons: they are not preparing for further education or they know what kind of jobs they are interested in after graduation from high school.

Employers and Employees

As part of the survey, persons in business and industry were asked to give their opinions of former vocational students in terms of the way in which they function on the job after graduation from high school. Employers were asked several questions regarding graduates of vocational programs. They were asked whether in employing new workers they gave preference to vocational graduates; if they did employ vocational graduates, how satisfied they were with them; and how vocational graduates compare with other beginning workers.

Of the 72 employers who answered the questionnaire, 31 said they gave preference to vocational education graduates when they employed new workers. While the number of responses from each region was small, it would appear from the responses that a larger percentage of employers in rural areas give preference to vocational education graduates when they are employing new workers. A smaller percentage of employers in the urban areas give preference to vocational graduates.

A total of 48 employers answered the question regarding their satisfaction with the vocational education graduates they had employed. Half of them (24 of 48) said they were very satisfied with the vocational graduates they employed. Another 17 said they were somewhat satisfied with the vocational students' performance. Only one employer gave the answer "not satisfied at all" and six said they had no opinion.

In responding to the question dealing with a comparision of vocational education graduates and others as beginning workers, 58% of those for whom the question applied said that vocational education graduates were better at their jobs. Another 18% of employers said vocational education graduates were about the same as other beginning workers. Only two of 63 employers answering this question said vocational education graduates do not perform as well as others.

While less than half the employers said they gave preference to vocational education graduates in hiring new workers, most of those who do employ vocational education graduates said they are very satisfied with them and that for the most part, they perform better than other new employees.

One specific question was asked of workers with regard to vocational education students. In this case, workers were asked if they now work with vocational education graduates or have at some time in the past worked with them, and if they did how would they rate vocational education graduates' performance on the job.

Three-quarters of the workers who responded to the survey said they are presently working with vocational education graduates or did

at some time in the past. Of that number of workers, 30% rated vocational education graduates' performance as very good. Another 47% said they perform above average on the job and 21% replied that they are just about like others. Only two individual workers out of the 115 said vocational students do not perform too well. None of the workers rated vocational education graduates as performing very poorly.

Overall, it would appear that both employers and workers give vocational education graduates high marks in terms of the way in which they perform on the job. While not all employers give preference to vocational education graduates in employing new workers, those who do appear to be quite satisfied with them.

Conclusions

The study results demonstrated that there is strong support for vocational education in Nevada. Not only is it considered important for schools to provide vocational programs, but it is viewed by a majority of the respondents as a necessary component of public secondary education. While opinions about the amount of emphasis that should be placed on these programs indicated some differences, the adult population groups outside the schools were more positive than were the educators. This does not imply that educators are less favorably inclined toward vocational education, but rather that a larger percentage seem to think that what currently exists can service the student population adequately. If in the future there was need to gain support for increasing public school efforts in vocational educaton, the target population for that support would, in all likelihood, be found among parents and persons in business and industry. The support for vocational programs and for increased emphasis is also supported by opinions that there need to be increased levels of fundings. Few people in each group appeared to be content with the current level of expenditures for vocational education and only a very small percentage of each group thinks that less money should be spent on vocational education. While the opinions could be interpreted as mostly positive in regard to increasing the financial support, there does not appear to be as much enthusiasm for large increases even though the overwhelming majority of people in all four groups consider vocational education important and believe that more emphasis should be placed on these school programs.